SCHOOL LIBRARIANS AND THE COVID SLIDE

Librarians at the Heart of School Renewal and Transformation
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INTRODUCTION

School leaders face an unprecedented challenge because of the so-called COVID slide. As school buildings closed and teaching moved from the classroom to the living room, education became unhinged. As some school districts were able to pivot to remote learning via learning management systems, others were left to figure out how to support their students with a lack of technology or internet access.

According to Robolen (2020), "Early indicators suggest remote learning has proven very uneven. And longstanding achievement gaps may well be amplified by months of school closures." We see school librarians as key partners with administration, other teachers, families, and education stakeholders in confronting these challenges and finding solutions that support students in any learning setting.

As Kuhfeld and Tarasawa (2020) explain, "While it is difficult to speculate on what missing months of school may mean for student achievement, research on seasonal learning and summer learning loss can offer some insights that can help educators, policymakers, and families understand, plan for, and address some potential impacts of this extended pause in classroom instruction when students return to school." The National Education Association (2020) theorizes, "We don't just want to 'get back' to school...We have a unique opportunity to create schools and campuses that are unequivocally resolute in their commitment to student learning, beacons of service and partnership to communities, and respected and sought-after institutions of employment. The aim is not adequacy; rather, it is productive excellence for all."

While much emphasis has been placed on administrators and classroom educators, there is one resource that should be maximized: the school librarians. School librarians are the link to literacy that empowers all learners with access to instructional opportunities. As a learning specialist, "School librarians embrace curiosity and work effectively in a climate of ambiguity and changing priorities. Whether within the traditional walls of the school library or across a virtual environment, school librarians offer students, parents, faculty, and administration resources and tools at their point of need to bridge achievement gaps, develop learner agency, and strengthen the learning culture" (Mackley, 2020).

"Especially in this time of uncertainty, [school] librarians have never been more critical to the nation's schools," says Bill Bass, Innovation Coordinator for Parkway School District in Missouri. "As master curators, we rely on librarians to sift through the abundance of information and digital noise. They are essential in helping teachers and students understand how to find and utilize high-quality digital tools and content, as well as celebrating and highlighting best practices in the digital age" (Davis, 2020). If there is one answer to mitigating the unprecedented challenges to our schools, it is the expertise of the school librarian.

Education Disrupted

During remote learning and quarantine, our lives have been destabilized, and we are living in a state of constant "beta". Each day is a test case and an attempt to resume standards of normalcy. Suzanne Grant Lewis (2020), Director of the International Institute for Educational Planning, indicates, "The COVID-19 pandemic is taking a heavy toll on people's health, lives, and societies. Less visible, but no less worrying, is the price that children and youth all over the world will pay in terms of education. School closures, confinement, and psychological distress will have serious consequences on their futures and well-being, as well as on those of their teachers and families." Virtual environments, transparent issues of inequity, and persistent knowledge gaps require experimentation, creativity, and risk-taking to overcome.

In this moment of crisis and disruption, society is also presented with new opportunities to reconsider education and strive for true equity for students and families. Education leaders are compelled to reimagine what teaching and learning might look like as the urgency to reform education flows into the next school year. In the March 2020 shutdowns, there was very little time to do anything but react But the ability to recover, to reinvigorate and to restore are open to those with insight and imagination. Especially during distance and blended learning, we may adopt "more sophisticated and flexible use of technology, less polarization...and more connection as we communicate with people who are physically farther and farther away" (Politico Magazine, 2020). The prospects are endless. The alternative is not only suffocating to the educational landscape but also alarmingly shortsighted.

The New Learning Gap

Without the robust delivery of instruction that occurs during a traditional school year, educators are left with questions about how much learning will be lost. There is a significant difference between students who are interested in learning versus students who are invested in learning. There are also students who are disinterested for a variety of reasons including what they believe to be the definition of learning--something happens to them rather than something they actively pursue. Teachers can flip this definition of schooling, so students have agency in and investment in their learning experiences. Let's consider the analogy of a schoolyard swing set for learning.. Instead of teachers "pushing" the students, educators need to pull out the variable of the curriculum, use it to empower students, and teach them to pump their own legs so they can swing by themselves. The importance of school librarians has never been so essential. They are the champions of inquiry-based, student-driven instruction. When a student is supported in their individualized learning and taught information literacy skills they can use independently, they are invested in their own learning; learning becomes embedded into who they are as people.

Summer Slide

Educational leaders have long-standing concerns about the summer slide, the loss of academic achievement that was gained during the previous school year. According to seasonal learning research, there is some disagreement about what the full extent of learning loss is. However, there are trends that are consistent across the research:

- Achievement typical slows or declines over the summer months
- Declines are steeper for math than for reading
- The extent of the loss increases in the upper grades
  (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020; Quinn & Polikoff, 2017)

The impact on learning loss is where there are inconsistencies. Early studies estimate declines of two to three months, whereas current research finds that there is more of a "summer slowdown" of small declines, as low as two weeks (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). The resulting achievement gaps are more pronounced among different socioeconomic groups with Black and Latino students gaining less over the school year and losing more over the summer. In addition, the summer slide places teachers in a position to spend time at the beginning of the school year re-teaching, which is "likely contributing to the repetitiveness of the typical U.S. curriculum. (Quinn & Polikoff, 2017). While the full repercussions of COVID are yet unknown, educational communities must adapt and evolve to find solutions and transform the educational services provided to learners.

COVID Slide

The COVID slide will impact students in far more severe ways than the summer slide. Early estimates suggest, "students will return in fall 2020 with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year. However, in mathematics, students are likely to show much smaller learning gains, returning with less than 50% of the learning gains and in some grades, nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). Many states have canceled or postponed assessments, so data on student performance will be limited. Even so, Zastrow (2020) claims that "researchers predict that students could lose up to a year of learning."

Hawkins (2020) anticipates that the impact will be even more profound for families who are reeling from the economic impact and the lack of their basic needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. When students return to school extra supports must be implemented to provide students with a chance for recovery academically and recover from the trauma COVID has imposed on the lives of both teachers and students. As equity, diversity, and inclusion come to the forefront of educational change, school districts must move beyond using stop-gap defenses to identifying and embedding critical solutions into our educational systems.

SCHOOL LIBRARIANS SUPPORT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

School librarians are also supporting the parents, caregivers, or guardians of their students by:

- Providing curated resources for at-home activities (non-homework): 80.19%
- Sharing community resources (public library resources, health and well-being resources, etc.): 75.77%
- Offering technology support: 61.31%
- Expanding engagement through virtual channels: 42.17%

As connectors to multiple educational literacies, specialists illuminating solutions for educators and administrators, and interlocutors to families, school librarians strengthen the learning culture (AASL 2020c).

Role of the School Librarian

School libraries have been a part of the school building for generations. The role of the school librarian, however, has shifted to rest at the heart of teaching and learning within the school. School librarians increase the capacity of learners to make an impact on and gain agency in their own education. Through instructional models such as inquiry learning, design thinking, and problem-based learning, school librarians provide the foundation to foster curiosity, exploration, creation and innovation. School librarians model and champion digital citizenship and adherence to accepted intellectual property standards. ISTE, International Society of Technology in Education (2020) acknowledges that "Librarians are school leaders who advocate for student access to [emerging] edtech, curate tools and resources, and collaborate with students and colleagues to create meaningful learning opportunities." School librarians amplify transformational learning.

As an integral and valued member of the learning community, the certified school librarian positively impacts learning by providing an environment for personalized learning, equitable access to resources, and instructional opportunities that engage learners in a well-rounded educational program (Cohen et al., 2019). School librarians embody multiple interconnected roles, often simultaneously. According to the American Association of School Librarians, certified school librarians have the education and training to serve as educators, leaders, instructional partners, informational specialists, and program administrators (American Association of School Librarians, 2020a). As part of the AASL document, there is a list of responsibilities that fall within each of the professional job categories and are aligned with the AASL National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Librarians (2018).

Within the physical library and across the virtual environment, the school librarian empowers all members of the learning community to become critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers, skillful researchers, curators, and ethical users of information. They support learners as they make meaning through traditional and multimedia text and create new knowledge to actively engage within a global society. The school librarian's reach extends beyond the walls of the library to engage with stakeholders, as well as local, state, and national organizations and partners. They are champions for social justice, as they model and develop a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (American Association of School Librarians, 2020a). As an educator who has a global view of the school, the school librarian addresses broader educational issues. The school librarian's expertise is far-reaching, and they are positioned at the center of the school's culture to be the solution to educational repercussions of COVID.

Uprooting Inequities

Inequities that may have been invisible to some are now visible to all. Moreillon (2020) affirms, "A high-quality education is a human right, and literacy is the foundation for all learning. From my perspective, every student and educator in every school across the country and around the globe deserves to have a literacy learning leader in the person of a certified school librarian." She equates fewer professional librarians to a lack of funding and misplaced priorities which has resulted in a "loss of equitable education for all" (Moreillon, 2020).

Educational inequities are not experienced across our whole society. Rural areas and communities of color have experienced particularly harsh impacts from the uneven implementation of distance learning, lack of access to digital devices, Internet, individual instructional support, and basic emotional, physical, and psychological needs. The National Education Association (2020) reports, "[i]t has been well documented that COVID-19 risks and impacts are disproportionately concentrated in America's communities of color, including medical risk factors, job losses, housing insecurity, food insecurity, and mortality rates."

Some student groups have suffered more than others. English language learners could fall farther behind due to a "confluence of factors, including limited access to the internet and the language support services they often receive in school" (Mitchell, 2020). Robolen (2020) adds that distance learning is "less effective at meeting the needs of students learning English, students with disabilities, or students who were already behind and needing targeted support."

In a statement to educators, the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (2020) cite, "Children in poverty grow up with fewer books in the home and less access to bookstores and public libraries; thus, making access to books through school libraries more important for these students" (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Students who are living in poverty, Black and Hispanic students, and students with disabilities proportionally gain more on reading and writing test scores than all students combined when their schools have school librarians. Students with IEPs also need attention from specialists, such as school librarians, who can curate accessible reading material and introduce technologies that help support learning.

With the presence of full-time, certified librarians, Lance and Kachel (2018), found that there are long-term cumulative learning effects, which could be a key finding and solution to both the summer and COVID slide for the entire school community. In addition, several impact studies suggest, "test scores tend to be higher where administrators, teachers, and librarians themselves think of the school librarian as a school leader; as a teacher, co-teacher, and in-service professional development provider; as a curriculum designer, instructional resources manager, and reading motivator; and as a technology teacher, troubleshooter, and source of instructional support" (Lance & Kachel, 2018).

SCHOOL LIBRARIANS AND VIRTUAL CONENT

In a series of surveys, the American Association of School Librarians (2020c) identified the role of school librarians during the COVID emergency remote learning experience.

The virtual class content/subjects being offered by school librarians include:

- Reading development (includes book clubs, read-alouds, storytimes, book talks, etc.): 74.61%
- Co-teaching with classroom or subject-area educators: 46.37%
- Research: 42.27%
- Digital resource training: 36.12%
- Social/emotional learning/support: 35.02%
- Digital citizenship: 29.81%
- English/Writing/Typing: 17.35%
- Computer science/coding: 16.56%
- STEM/STEAM: 14.98%
- Makerspace: 11.99%
- Games/Gaming: 11.51%

School Librarians as Education Thought Leaders

School librarians are trained experts in learning through inquiry. Multiple iterations of questions bring many potential answers. School librarians in a unique position to not only ask questions but also to drive innovation and creativity in finding the answers. A Harvard Business Review author writes, "One of the most empowering things leaders can do in the face of unanswerable questions is to use broader questions to draw out people's deeper concerns. In doing so, you may end up helping others discover their own strength, which works far better than offering the answer you think they want." (Carucci, 2020)

The National Education Association (2020) reports that the reopening of schools must be equitable and inclusive. Humanizing learning environments is going to be paramount as schools reopen, whether in a physical school building or in a virtual environment. The rules we previously lived by do not apply. Along with their colleagues, school librarians ``...must be given meaningful opportunities to collaborate with decision-makers and provide greater autonomy to innovate under challenging and changing conditions. Educators practice a complex craft and their understanding of how to deliver curriculum and build student social and critical thinking skills must be honored and respected" (National Education Association, 2020).

Why school librarians? If properly prepared and supported, school librarians are well-positioned to be at the leading edge of the digital transformation of learning (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2019). School librarians shift and adapt to provide equity of access to resources, especially in a world in which the divide exists among new sets of the populations with some parents deemed "essential workers" and other working from home; some with healthcare and other without; some with reliable resources and some without (Cox, 2020). School librarians are stakeholders in the educational community who ensure students have the services they need to succeed academically and socially. They have a global view of the school, the curriculum, and the culture. As natural problem-solvers, they provide meaningful opportunities not only for the instruction or co-instruction of students but also for teachers as they provide professional learning for their colleagues.

School librarians are known to provide safe, personalized environments. When schools reopen, school librarians are positioned to provide guidance and solutions to ensure all learners have the informational resources and humanized learning environments they deserve. Studies show that "students who come from a high school with a certified school librarian have higher scores on information literacy assessments" (Huisman, 2015). School librarians are at the center of school renewal and transformation (Mackley, 2020).

This is the tipping point. In a world where information is all around us yet, we do not know whom to trust, it is the school librarian who can sift through this culture of information overload. School librarians are trained to ask questions and to analyze information. They provide a path to understanding facts versus fiction and the spectrum of misinformation to disinformation. They model and apply ethical decision-making as they create and share intellectual property. School librarians focus on the skills that every student needs and workforce development goals that unpack college and career-ready skills. As Moreillion (2020) states, "Serving as an effective school librarian is a complex job. It requires a passion for learning and literacy and a steadfast commitment to serve the entire learning community." And all of this translates to the classroom.

Addressing the Slide

As learning coaches, school librarians "uplift educators' strengths, allow specialization and embrace ongoing professional learning. Afford opportunities for educators to disseminate and learn best practices and innovative ideas with one another and provide professional development for differentiated needs" (Lance & Kachel, 2018). Moreover, school librarians:

> *provide teacher-led, immediately relevant, and differentiated professional learning. Some of the needs that should be addressed include: a. Assisting educators who are struggling to make the transition to using technology; b. Providing opportunities for beginning and experienced educators to receive mentoring from educators with skills such as those most needed for providing effective online instruction; c. Identifying alternative means to measure student learning—for example, training educators on how to write valid assessments; and d. Working with educators to identify multiple ways to implement professional learning goals and training as well as meet teacher evaluation requirements (Lance & Kachel, 2018).*

The American Association of School Librarians (2020b) reports, "When asked what topics they [school librarians] were covering during virtual meetings/collaborative events for other educators/classroom teachers/administrators, many respondents noted, "whatever teachers need." This response demonstrates school librarians' impact as they help educators meet the needs of individual learners during the ever-changing educational landscape."

SCHOOL LIBRARIANS MEET CRITICAL NEEDS

School librarians not only continue to meet the needs of learners in a virtual environment, but they are also leaders in their schools and districts, enabling and facilitating educator and administrator needs in the shifting landscape (AASL 2020c). School librarians are:

- Offering resource curation and technology tools for "classroom" instruction (includes suggesting titles/resources): 84.94%
- Providing virtual assistance (online, phone, etc.): 81.11%
- Expanding online resources, including expansion of resources and materials on school website(s): 79.75%
- Facilitating virtual meetings/collaborative events/professional development: 77.53%
- Providing technology support (setting up and using online resources/tools, tutorials, etc.): 71.98%
- Answering intellectual freedom/fair-use questions: 58.40%
- Co-teaching with classroom or subject expert educators: 36.54%

Teach for Tomorrow

Uniquely positioned, school librarians are "content liaisons." There are no other educators who receive as much formal training in "selection, evaluation, and integration of educational resources" as school librarians do (Lance & Kachel, 2018). They weave skill instruction into content areas and adapt their practices to provide differentiated resources and enrichment opportunities. As trained professionals, they can:

> *evaluate online databases for potential licensing, investigate open educational resources, locate resources in languages other than English, and seek out texts written at specific reading levels, thus saving teachers valuable instructional time. Librarians can curate lists of internet sites and web tools for specific assignments and even help teachers integrate such resources in their instruction. (Lance & Kachel, 2018)*

School librarians know how to keep the balance between the use of technology and keeping the human element of educational practice in the forefront of the learner's experience (National Education Association, 2020). When we place school librarians in the middle of the stream of teaching and learning, they can not only identify gaps in critical thinking skills but also enhance opportunities that build upon curiosity and creativity. As trusted authorities for the research process, they guide learners through the information landscape and teach them to question, evaluate, curate, synthesize, share, and reflect.

Another vital role of the school librarian is to promote social justice education by providing culturally diverse resources and literature. Librarians are experts in the location, evaluation, and curation of books that allow students to "see" themselves in the stories. Race, culture, and socioeconomic status have been brought to the forefront of our local, state, and world news. The way students are taught about history and why it matters in today's world is essential. Culturally diverse teaching with curated resources provides students with a voice and allows them to share their own stories in unison with the curriculum. Even the smallest, intentional changes in library and classroom resources help to build community within the classroom and across the school population. Teaching and learning through a lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion equips students with skills and knowledge to thrive and become leaders in our society.

Assisting students to pursue personal interests, beyond what they might learn in the traditional classroom curriculum, is an opportunity for school librarians to support social and emotional learning. Through personalized learning interactions, students satisfy their curiosities while the school librarian serves as a learning coach to assist and provide immediate feedback regarding the following skills:

- Self-awareness and self-management to recognize and regulate emotions
- Establishing and maintaining relationships to communicate and collaborate amongst diversity
- Social problem-solving skills to demonstrate empathy and respectful choice (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018)

Equally as important, school librarians teach these skills, so students can continue their learning without us.

School librarians provide instruction and employ the principles of Universal Design for Learning. Principle 1 is providing multiple means of engagement which "correlates to the affective networks of the brain" (Sturge, 2020). Educators engage students through relevant, authentic activities, sustained tenacity, and self-reflection. School librarians naturally adopt this principle through the curation of literature and instructional strategies that anchor instruction through technology, discussion, collaboration, inquiry, media literacy, research, and a growth mindset (Sturge, 2020). Sturge (2020) defines the second principle, multiple means of representation, as it aligns with the recognition networks of the brain - the "what" of learning. Students recognize patterns, see relationships, visualize, and process information.

SCHOOL LIBRARIANS
at the center of
School Renewal & Transformation

School librarians embrace curiosity and work effectively in a climate of ambiguity and changing priorities.

Whether within the traditional walls of the school library or across a virtual environment, school librarians offer students, parents, faculty, and administration resources and tools at their point of need to bridge achievement gaps, develop agency, and strengthen the learning culture.

Foster Equity & Belonging

Provides equitable access to culturally responsive resources for social and emotional learning and trauma-informed education that inspire personal growth, meet learners' emotional needs, and promote a culture of belonging

Link to Literacy

Empowers ALL learners with access to instructional opportunities through the library, as well as books and digital resources that address multiple literacies and diverse perspectives to inspire inquiry and creativity

Value through Curation

Expertly vets, appraises financial value, and curates a diverse collection of resources with and for students and professionals that support the curriculum, interests, and needs of the school community

Instruct with Expertise

Trained to instruct learners as they navigate and master a full range of research, media, information fluency, and digital literacy skills

Empower with Technology

Anticipates future trends and embraces the integration of innovative technologies and ethical use of digital resources across the curriculum

ADAPT   NAVIGATE   SHAPE   CONNECT   INCLUDE

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Whether physical or virtual, school librarians build a foundation and curate books, audiobooks, eBooks, periodicals, databases, technology, video, and music. The third principle provides for multiple means of action and expression - the "how" of learning. School librarians support teachers and students as they explore ways to research, leverage technology, create with video and audio, and engage audiences with presentations. The resources and instruction provided in collaboration with classroom teachers, help to develop expert learners who are purposeful and motivated; resourceful and knowledgeable; and strategic and goal-directed (Sturge, 2020).

As specialists, school librarians are critical in the transition to digital learning. Wolf et al. (2014) report that librarians are essential partners, as they "collaborate with classroom teachers to infuse technology across the curriculum. They often provide professional development for teachers in technology integration, resource access and utilization, and digital citizenship. They support, collaborate, and co-teach with classroom teachers in reading development, in integrating information and technology literacy skills into the curriculum, and in meeting the expectations for research." School librarians, who maintain a virtual presence for their libraries, are also positioned to assist with online learning, as they are familiar with instructional technology, web design, tutorial and instructional videos, and graphic design. Librarians provide "crucial behind-the-scenes support to teachers by curating resources for lessons, collaborating on planning projects, and supporting them in using technology tools" (Missouri School Boards' Association's Center for Education Safety, 2020) They are the standard for continuous learning for personal and academic development.

Partnerships are elevated when the school librarian collaborates with other educators, administrators, parents, and community organizations. A recent survey completed by the American Association of School Librarians (2020d) cited, "school librarians were recognized by their school community as the go-to person for learners, educators, and parents. AASL knows school librarians have always transformed teaching and learning in the shifting educational landscape." Whether it be through video conferencing or in-person interactions, school librarians build capacity among adjacent groups. School librarians enhance family engagement through literacy resources and make community connections with their public libraries to provide additional programming and access to print and electronic resources.

Promise and Possibilities

As we can see, school librarians are the great equalizers in education. School librarians, who take on many roles simultaneously, can shift and translate in-school practices to remote practices. The NY Translation of Practice for school Librarians presents an explicit depiction of how school librarians address and practice learning and teaching, information access and delivery, and program administration in both the physical in-school environment and through remote practices (New York City Department of Education & New York City School Library System, 2020). The translation of practice is direct - not forced or contrived. School librarians are compelled to meet the needs of students, educators, administration, parents, and the rest of the school community regardless of where "school" may occur.

Present school librarians with a crisis, like the COVID slide, and they will work effectively to adapt and navigate through the challenges. They support the curriculum by empowering all learners as they connect them to print and digital resources that support multiple literacies and diverse perspectives. School librarians foster equity and belonging as they meet learners' needs and inspire personal growth. School librarians present possibilities. They are essential partners and key thought leaders in each school's quest to find a solution to the COVID slide.

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